



GAIL FARBER, Director

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

"To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service"

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September 8, 2009

IN REPLY PLEASE

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TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Gail Farber *Gail Farber*
Director of Public Works

Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman *P. Michael Freeman*

Jon Sanabria, Acting Director *Jon Sanabria*
Department of Regional Planning

BOARD MOTION OF JULY 7, 2009, AGENDA ITEM 4 STREAMLINING THE APPROVAL PROCESS FOR THE INSTALLATION OF RESIDENTIAL SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC SYSTEMS

On July 7, 2009, your Board approved a motion by Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky instructing the Director of Public Works in cooperation with the Acting Director of Regional Planning to develop recommendations to the Board within 30 days to:

- Eliminate unnecessary or duplicative regulatory review processes for the approval of residential (one and two family dwellings) solar photovoltaic (PV) system installation; and
- Ensure current fee information is fully disseminated to the appropriate solar industry stakeholders.

On July 31, 2009, the Department of Public Works (Public Works) advised your Board that an additional 30 days would be necessary for completion of the analysis and review by County Counsel.

Background

Residential PV systems can be rooftop or ground mounted. Most rooftop PV systems are mounted on racks that stand above the south (sometimes east and west) facing roof. Rooftop systems can also utilize solar "shingles" which are PV modules integrated into the standard roofing shingle. Ground-mounted PV systems are used to take advantage of large south facing yards and are typically used for homes with roof planes that do not face south.

A typical home in the County of Los Angeles (County) uses 5,000 Kilowatt Hours (kwh) of electricity annually. A two-kilowatt residential rooftop-mounted PV system in the County produces about 3,600 kwh/year and may require up to 600 square feet of ideally sloped, unshaded south facing roof area.

Current Approval Process

The current review and approval process for PV systems involves three County departments: Regional Planning, Public Works, and Fire.

The Department of Regional Planning (Regional Planning) reviews proposed installations for compliance with the County's land use and zoning requirements. This includes the analysis of height, yard setbacks, and compliance with specific requirements of community standards districts. In order to recover the cost of providing this service, Regional Planning charges a Zoning Conformance Review fee of \$177.00.

Public Works' review and inspection process is conducted by Building and Safety staff. Building and Safety reviews the proposed installation for compliance with the County Building and Electrical Codes. Installers of rooftop-mounted systems are required to demonstrate the new system will not compromise the structural integrity of the roof system and will remain securely anchored during wind and seismic events. For ground-mounted systems, installers are required to verify the structural foundation systems will adequately protect from tipping or overturning. In addition, Building and Safety verifies the system has proper electrical ratings, appropriate wiring and grounding, and the components and assembly are approved by the appropriate listing and testing agency. After reviewing the plans, building and electrical permits are issued. Inspections are then made to verify the field installation is consistent with the approved plans. In order to recover the cost of plan review, permit issuance, and inspection, Public Works collects building and electrical fees. For the review and inspection of a residential system of ten kilowatts or less, there is a flat fee of approximately \$370.00.

The Fire Department (Fire) reviews proposed installations over the predetermined thresholds for issues related to public and fire-fighter safety. The current threshold is to review systems that cover more than 50 percent of the roof area to verify fire-fighter access and smoke vent locations. This is consistent with the State of California Fire Marshal's "Solar Photovoltaic Installation Guideline" published April 22, 2008. Fire does not charge a fee; the cost of performing the plan review is recovered through funding from the Consolidated Fire Protection District.

Recommendations to Streamline Approval Process

Staff from Regional Planning, Public Works, and Fire met to discuss methods of streamlining the existing approval process.

It was agreed that referrals to Regional Planning would no longer be required for rooftop-mounted solar PV systems that do not project above the highest point of an existing roof. Regional Planning has determined that the fiscal impact of forgoing the \$177.00 fee for complying rooftop-mounted solar PV systems would be minimal.

Referrals to Regional Planning would continue to be made for other solar PV systems applications, including ground-mounted systems. The additional fee for Regional Planning to review such other solar PV systems is \$177.00. However, in the event that an application involved alterations to a structure that were not part of a solar PV system itself or required relief from development standards that required further permitting or approvals, the applicable fee would vary based on the type of modification needed and type of permit required. Customers will be referred to Fire only in cases in which the proposed system covers more than 50 percent of the roof surface.

Regional Planning and Fire would provide training and written guidelines to Public Works' Building and Safety staff to review and approve residential rooftop-mounted solar PV systems meeting the criteria described above. For such PV systems, customers will no longer have to submit plans to three departments and pay two separate fees. The fees for such review will remain at approximately \$370.00.

For PV systems meeting the criteria described above, Public Works will be the single point of contact for customers, and will be the County entity responsible for the review and approval of such systems.

Conclusion

Regional Planning, Public Works, and Fire anticipate cross training to be completed and the new review and approval process to begin in October 2009. The new streamlined process will significantly reduce customer trips, overall plan review and approval times, and permit costs. This information will be distributed to the public by each of the three departments. In addition, Public Works has prepared written correspondence explaining the streamlined process to the solar industry and other stakeholders, including the Sierra Club.

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Each of the involved departments is aware that your Board continues to be a leader in encouraging environmental policies that demonstrate a commitment to sustainable energy sources. The field of renewable energy is rapidly evolving. As changes continue to take place in the solar PV industry, the departments will continue to monitor the process to determine if additional efficiencies can be gained.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact me or your staff may contact Raj Patel, Superintendent of Building, at (626) 458-6385 or rkpatel@dpw.lacounty.gov.

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cc: Chief Executive Office (Lari Sheehan)
County Counsel
Executive Office